

Yesterdays/An Evening with Billie Holiday  
Hartford Stage  
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By Donna Bailey-Thompson

Playwright Reenie Upchurch was 16 when she met Billie Holiday. "I told her I wanted to be just like her. Billie replied, never in a billion years would I want to be like her. I didn't understand that statement then but I would a couple years later. ...Billie was staggering around the stage talking out of her head, trying to make a connection, laughing and crying sporadically." This is the Billie that Upchurch's play focuses on.

"An Evening with Billie Holiday" May 1959. New York City. A small club. Three musicians wander onto the stage. Levi Barcourt (Musical Director/Pianist), resplendent in a shimmering sharkskin suit, sits down at the piano and blisters the keys with a hands-blurring arrangement of "The Lady Is A Tramp." A master is in charge. Plucking the bass is another pro, David Jackson. On drums is Bernard Davis; his sticks never over shadow, they always enhance. But no Billie. The musicians wonder, "Where is she?" and "I'm getting tired of this." In she drifts, slightly swaying, clinging to glamour in a white satin halter neckline gown; matching gloves top her elbows. Stuck in her hair is a shiny white artificial flower, not a real gardenia like back when times were good. She holds a short, fat glass, half full of a clear liquid, as much as saying, "I don't give a damn." Pure bravado. She fools no one.

Billie, as interpreted by Vanessa Rubin, charms and breaks hearts with her soulful songs. Rubin doesn't impersonate Billie; she embraces her memory and out pours loneliness, sadness and psychic pain. The Washington Post has raved, "Vanessa Rubin is one of the most gifted jazz vocalists of her generation." Officers wait to arrest her – again. Billie knows they're there. Within a few months, at age 44, she will die of heart and liver failure, a direct result of the demons she couldn't conquer.

The naturalness of this musical portrait disarms: the musicians' concern for her well-being, Billie's sly asides, her rough life (she was raped when only nine), the arc of her love for and from the audience; her phrasing that beguiles – she was a natural. Bravo Director Woodie King, Jr.